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ABSTRACT

In 1982, Ursinus College instituted a new Freshman Advising Program (FAP), involving: a greatly expanded role for the advisor; postponement of the declaration of major; greater emphasis on student-centered developmental advising; a focus on the transition needs of freshmen; a focus on the problem of false starts and student encounters with failure; and a focus on prevention by detecting individual needs early and meeting them promptly and appropriately. An Adviser Effectiveness Questionnaire was developed and administered to freshmen in 1981 (the last class advised under the old system), 1985 and 1988. Subsamples of the data including all freshman advisors were analyzed. Statistically significant differences between the 1985 and 1988 groups were found on 15 of the 16 individual items and on the General Advising Effectiveness Scale. On all separate measures of satisfaction, students in the 1988 group scored in the more satisfied direction than those in the 1985 group. Comparisons of means revealed only two statistically significant differences between the 1988 and 1991 groups, suggesting that generally the improvement in satisfaction with advising and overall gains in advising effectiveness have been maintained. Student gains in satisfaction across the personal, career, academic and study skills areas of advising were associated with increased overall happiness with the college. Data are presented in two tables. (KM)

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Comprehensive Freshman Advising
THE URSINUS COLLEGE FRESHMAN ADVISING PROGRAM: Three Year Follow Up

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Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D

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INTRODUCTION

Today's students typically need more time and more advice in assessing the wider range of career and life options available to them. Connected to this is an increased need for assistance in academic planning. Students confront more diverse academic options in today's curriculum, and discover that college coursework decisions relate to today's expanded career options in increasingly complex ways. The process of adjusting to college life, with its greater demand for personal responsibility and independence, has always been challenging. It is now widely recognized that this process can be facilitated by a helping relationship with someone skilled in guiding young adults.

Ursinus College introduced a new Freshman Advising Program at the beginning of the 1982-83 academic year. Drawing on recent research on personal, social, and cognitive development during the traditional college-age years, the program called on specially trained faculty to play a greatly expanded role as mentor-advisors. While Ursinus has always recognized the powerful influence a caring and stimulating faculty has on student growth, it was felt that current conditions require faculty to make a renewed, more systematic effort to affect students' personal development.

Ursinus College is a private four year liberal arts college located twenty miles northwest of Philadelphia. The College enrollment is approximately 1100 students, with nearly equal numbers of men and women. It is primarily a residential college, with over ninety percent of the student body residing on campus. The college is competitive with its area sister institutions; the average combined verbal and quantitative SAT score is over 1100, and nearly all students are drawn from the upper two fifths or better of their high school class.

During the 1977-78 academic year, as part of the Middle States accreditation review process, Ursinus College underwent a year of institutional self-study. One aspect of this self-study was a review of the student retention question. The report of the group responsible for this review indicated that the quality of the freshman year experience is critical for student retention. It is the quality of this year's experience that, if positive,

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prepares the student for a successful undergraduate career, or alternately, if negative, is an extremely important component in the student's decision to withdraw. After reviewing the then current system of freshman advising, the group made some broad recommendations for change. The most important recommendations were as follows; first, freshmen should not declare a major until the end of the freshman year, and second, advising of freshmen should be done by advisers prepared to give the freshmen much more individualized attention which should include, but which should also go beyond, academic advising.

In light of these recommendations, a study group was convened to consider the recommendations themselves and to devise, if warranted, an institutional response to these recommendations. The study group did so, and the final result of these deliberations is the Freshman Advising Program (FAP), approved by the faculty for implementation in the fall of 1982. The faculty also stipulated that a review of the program was to take place following the completion of the third year of its operation. In anticipation of this review, an Adviser Effectiveness Questionnaire was developed to measure student satisfaction with various aspects of the advising process, as well as their satisfaction with the college generally. This questionnaire was administered in the spring of 1981 to members of the freshman class (the Class of 1985), the last freshman class to be advised under the old system, in order to provide a baseline measure against which the effectiveness of the new program could be assessed. The mandated assessment was carried out in the spring of 1985, allowing comparison of the Class of 1988 (FAP group) with the Class of 1985 (control group). A follow-up program was conducted in the spring of 1988, using members of the Class of 1991. The results of these assessment will be reported following a more detailed description of the program.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

A broad overview of the program will be given first. The ultimate goals of the program were to help students make a more satisfactory adjustment to college as a means of increasing the College's retention rate and to start students on their way to becoming independent and responsible individuals, capable of making sound independent judgements. Obviously, the Freshman Advising Program was not expected to achieve these goals by itself. Rather, the Freshman Advising Program was viewed as part of a larger set of mutually reinforcing activities designed to achieve these common objectives.

Students no longer, as was the previous practice, declare a major prior to matriculation. Formal declaration of a major is delayed until the end of the freshman year. Each freshman is assigned to a specially trained freshman advisor, who has responsibility for from six to twelve

freshmen. These advisors are drawn from both the faculty and the administrative professional staff. The advisors have a number of resources to draw upon, including an annually revised Freshman Advisor Handbook and special training workshops on aspects of the advising process including career counseling, study skills counseling, and personal listening skills.

Freshman advisors, who are assigned advisees randomly, first meet their advisees during the summer academic orientation sessions held in June. During the academic orientation students are given placement examinations in foreign languages and mathematics, the results of which are then made available to the advisor. After the placement exams, freshmen meet individually with their individual advisors to discuss the general academic requirements of the college and to begin to formulate a schedule of courses for the coming fall term. The actual schedule is not determined, but choices are made based on student interests and abilities. This also serves as a time for advisors to become acquainted with their advisees on a personal level and to explain the nature of the program to them. As part of this meeting advisors explain that it is their expectation, as well as the college's, that they, the students, will meet regularly on a weekly and individual basis with the advisors for a short time. The purpose of these weekly meetings is to check on the progress of the student's adjustment to college both academically and socially. If students are experiencing difficulties a longer meeting is arranged to deal with the problem. Students are also told that they may feel free to seek out their advisors at any time, beyond the regularly scheduled weekly meeting. After first semester midterm grades are issued, freshmen have a longer conference with advisers to discuss their progress. If progress is satisfactory, the freshmen are told that a weekly meeting is no longer necessary, but they are encouraged to consult their advisor as needed.

NEW PROGRAM RATIONALE

The old method of advising freshmen wasn't bad; Ursinus was doing what most colleges continue to do with freshman advising, namely, assign freshmen to the department of the declared major and provide sporadic, cursory contacts with advisors who sign course schedules and the like. Our old methods were't bad, but we wanted to try something better. In particular, we hoped to address unmet needs concerning personal and career advising.

The new Freshman Advising Program represents a significant departure from the previous system in six respects. First, we've greatly expanded the role of the advisor. Second, we've postponed the declaration of major.

Third, the new FAP places greater emphasis on student-centered developmental advising. Fourth, the new program specifically addresses the transition needs of freshman. Fifth, the program specifically addresses the problem of false starts and student encounters with failure. And sixth, the FAP focuses on prevention, by detecting individual needs early and meeting needs promptly and appropriately.

It is useful to consider each of these points individually. First, the expanded role of the faculty advisor has greatly changed freshman advising. Advisors continue to play an important role in academic planning - course selection and scheduling - but have also been trained to attend to some personal problems students may choose to share. They have also participated in workshops to help them aid students in the process of career decision-making. Advisors recognize the need for student exploration and deliberation as they contemplate major and career choices.

Freshman advisors serve as active and supportive listeners - contact with advisors provides an opportunity for students to reflect, to organize their thoughts, consider alternatives, and evaluate options. By doing this, they therefore engage in more methodical decision-making about personal, academic, and career matters. Today's students face more options than ever. Our increasingly complex, dynamic, and pluralistic world provides seemingly endless choices; freshman can become bewildered if not overwhelmed! They can use an objective sounding board to help sort out the chaos and seek a systematic approach to searching for the best "fits" between the self and the world.

Freshman advisors now have more of an ongoing relationship with and much more frequent contacts with advisees. In response, advisees report feeling significantly more comfortable in talking with their advisors than did students who received the previous type of advising. Whereas in the past students said their freshman advisors were not very accessible and that they frequently met with them only one time, now students report easy accessibility and average more than four contacts per term. The freshman advisor can become a mentor - a lasting friend. When interests and outlook mesh students may continue to work with the faculty member and maintain and develop their personal relationship well beyond the freshman year.

We feel the postponed declaration of major is central to our program's effectiveness. Freshmen are not expected to formally declare a major until midway through the spring semester, after they've had some time to adjust and sample college offerings. The time for deliberation about the major and the opportunity to benefit from college course experience prior to making a decision about a major allows

students more meaningful and satisfying commitments - more informed and certain choices.

There have been additional benefits from this change connected to the fact that the advisors' freshmen are assigned are usually not from the department they will eventually choose to major in. The new FAP has helped to equalize distribution of advisees across different departments. It has helped to prevent faculty from being overloaded with advisees, which allows for more personalized, timely contact between faculty and students. The new program permits students to gain familiarity with a broader sample of faculty, allowing students to create a close relationship with a faculty member outside the department of their major. This is sometimes useful later when they want a perspective on a topic that perhaps differs from that of the department of their major.

We are following a model of student-centered advising which offers highly individualized, nondirective opportunities for growth and development of student responsibility and independence. Freshman advisors work to help students learn to make their own decisions and feel more fully in control of their lives. Advising is more personalized - more attuned to the specific needs of each student, more linked to their particular developmental stages and needs.

The new FAP specifically recognizes and helps to mediate the stresses of transitions from high school to college. The program puts faculty in close, intimate contact with students from the very beginning of their college experience. Advisors first sit down for an hour-long chat to acquaint themselves with each new student during June before their first semester. Many students are still more preoccupied by issues pertaining to their senior prom or graduation parties than thoughts of Ursinus at the onset of these conversations, but usually by the end, their sights have been broadened a bit. They can use spare moments during their summer to begin framing their college objectives, to begin defining themselves as more adult.

The early meeting makes the freshman advisor a transition figure who will assist the student in bridging two importantly different developmental periods. Knowing a professor, maybe more importantly, being known by a professor makes the challenge of those first weeks on campus easier to embrace, easier to see as a challenge to grow rather than a threat to security and a loss of predictability. This view that freshmen have of the new experiences they are undertaking can make a tremendous difference. We want them to be confident and motivated to jump right in, discover their strengths, and become committed to goals they value.

The new FAP addresses the problems of false starts and trouble spots. We know it feels risky to attempt new tasks and to strive to achieve. Change requires risk-taking, and some of the risk-taking may result in failure. Indeed if someone never stumbles, have they really learned something new. If you succeed at something on the first try, one could argue you already knew how to do it. Students who are too afraid of failure may never dare to really learn, to really test their limits. Students must be helped to learn from their stumbling, to learn how to use failure experiences for the information they can provide and to resist the temptation to recoil from future challenges for fear of encountering failure again.

Since first brushes with failure are often harder than later ones - and since we are a very selective school that only admits qualified students who often haven't "failed" at much of anything, our freshmen frequently grapple with their first life stumbling here. Freshman advisors are very important in aiding students to gain a constructive perspective on their "stumbles", to use these experiences productively and to tolerate a bruised ego's pain and bounce back with enthusiasm and optimism. Because freshmen sense their advisors care and continue to care even in bad times, their advisors may gently suggest that they aren't the first able and intelligent person to get a midsemester F in chemistry and that they are far from the "powerless has beens" they may <u>feel</u> like at the moment.

Last, the FAP <u>prevents</u> small problems from becoming big problems. It's an example of preventive psychology that really works. By detecting personal and academic difficulties early, advisors prevent them from developing into real hindrances, either by providing direct assistance or sensitive, timely referral to the more formal helping network on campus.

Although never formally labeled as such, the FAP functions as a useful component to the loosely structured system Ursinus has in place to address special mental health needs of students which arise from time to time. Because all freshmen have advisors with whom they meet regularly, we detect the occasional serious mental health problems they have much earlier than before. Advisers refer students in need of immediate off-campus extra help through the Office of Student Life to off-campus counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists with whom we have developed liasons.

The FAP also addresses the much more common needs students have for help with temporary, mild psychological distress. Because it can be stigmatizing to seek out professional help for personal problems, and since many freshman with mild adjustment difficulties, who are already feeling badly about themselves, may feel it especially difficult to risk being labeled "abnormal" in any way, the

fact that everyone has a freshman advisor and that everyone is expected to meet with them regularly makes it easier for students to get the help they need without feeling stigmatized or inadequate.

FACULTY TRAINING AND PARTICIPATION

Advising Skills Development

Because the Freshman Advising Program required faculty to assume new and expanded roles, there was a need to help them develop the skills to perform in these roles. The advising skills component of the Faculty Development Program was designed to help faculty advisors develop new advising skills and to improve old ones. The method used to achieve these goals has been an annual series of workshops intended primarily for new freshman advisors, but open to other interested faculty as well. These workshops have been conducted during the summer months, for the most part by outside experts. In the first three years of the program's operation, 52 or 65% of the full-time faculty participated in this workshop series. During the ensuing three years, faculty participation increased slightly and stabilized at roughly 70%.

The annual advising skills workshops focus on academic advising, career counseling skills, personal counseling, and study skills development. Participating faculty were asked to evaluate the workshops at the end of each annual series. Overall, response to the workshops has been quite positive and faculty members have perceived the training program to be fairly effective in equipping them with necessary skills. A few faculty members who have now had several years of experience as freshman advisors have expressed a desire for advanced workshops to refine their skills. This demonstrates both interest in and commitment to the program; efforts are currently underway to secure funding for such advanced training opportunities.

Faculty participation in the Freshman Advising Program has been voluntary and without explicit remuneration. Nonetheless, over one half of the full-time faculty , and ten other staff members, have served as freshman advisors. Admittedly this new expanded advising role demands considerable investment of time and energy, but the participating faculty obviously value the program's objectives. A survey of freshman advisors showed that almost all participants viewed their experience quite positively.

OUTCOME EVALUATION METHOD

Student Ratings of Advising Effectiveness

Student evaluations of freshman advising were obtained from the Class of 1985 at the end of their freshman year, in order to estimate the adequacy of freshman advising prior to institution of the new advising program. The instrument used, the Advisor Effectiveness Questionnaire (AEQ), was developed specifically to measure the dimensions of advising believed to be most critical to the student's developmental experience. This same instrument was administered to members of the Class of 1988 and the Class of 1991 at the end of their freshman year. The responses of the Class of 1988, who experienced the new system of freshman advising, allowed for a meaningful preprogram-postprogram comparison to assess the effectiveness of the new Freshman Advising Program. The Class of 1991 responses provided follow-up data to assess the effects of the continuing FAP.

Data collection was done in conjunction with the declaration of major process. Each student completed the confidential AEQ, secured it in a signed, sealed envelope, and returned it to the program evaluator. A research assistant, who was uninformed about the study's objectives, coded and entered all raw data.

Advisor Effectiveness Questionnaire (AEQ) data from 273 respondents from the class of 1988 (83%) were entered along with advisor codes. A representative subsample of 158 Class of 1988 subjects, comparable in size to the 1985 sample (n = 146), was extracted by randomly sampling within each advisor group. Similarly, a subsample of 158 Class of 1991 subjects was extracted from the total Class of 1991 subject pool of 255. The extraction procedure assured that all freshman advisors would be reflected in the final Class of 1988 and Class of 1991 samples used to evaluate the program's effect.

A summary scale including all eleven items pertaining to advising effectiveness, called the General Advising Effectiveness Scale (GAES) was also created. Values on this scale were computed for all subjects by totalling the directionally-adjusted scores for all included items. Again, scores were adjusted by adding the bottommost range value in order to eliminate negative values. High scores on the GAES indicate high satisfaction with freshman advising, across all the varied dimensions assessed.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for all 16 items and the General Advising Effectiveness Scale (GAES) were calculated for the 1985, 1988, and 1991 samples. These values are presented in Table 1. Multiple t tests were performed, using an adjusted alpha level of .01 to correct for repeated comparisons (see Table 2).

Old versus New Program Comparison

Comparisons of means revealed statistically significant differences between the 1985 and 1988 groups on 15 of the 16 individual items ($p < .01$) and on the GAES ($p < .001$). On all separate measures of satisfaction, students in the 1988 group scored in the more satisfied direction than those in the 1985 group.

Students in the group affected by the new Freshman Advising Program (Class of 1988) were significantly more satisfied with their advisors' handling of their personal problems and felt significantly less reluctant to talk about personal problems with their advisor. Two significant reversals accompanied the new program. Whereas the Class of 1985 students on average perceived their advisor as inaccessible and felt uncomfortable with their advisor, the Class of 1988 found their advisors accessible and reported feeling comfortable with them.

Furthermore, the frequency of contact with advisors during the freshman year doubled under the new program. Students affected by the new program were significantly more satisfied with their advisors' handling of questions regarding study skills, career choices and decisions, and academic matters (such as choice of courses). Overall, students in the Class of 1988 were significantly more satisfied with the overall quality of advising they received.

Consistent with the other findings from this survey, students who had experienced the new advising program showed less preference for going to peers for advice and support, although the magnitude of this change was small. These specific significant effects of the Freshman Advising Program are summarized by the summary index of satisfaction (GAES). This scale showed a significant increase for the experimental program group.

Since satisfaction with advising was presumed to correlate with general satisfaction with Ursinus, an item measuring the latter variable was included. A significant reversal on this item reveals that while most students in the Class of 1985 tended to disagree with the statement, "In general I am happy with my decision to come to Ursinus", students in the Class of 1988 tended to agree with this same statement. This striking finding prompted a review of the intercorrelations between this item and other indices of satisfaction. This "happiness with Ursinus" item was found to be significantly ($p<.01$) associated with all individual measures of advising satisfaction and the summary scale of General Adviising Effectiveness.

On the summary measure of academic adjustment difficulty, students in the 1988 group reported more relative difficulty with study skills and academic problems,

and less difficulty with career and personal adjustment. The Class of 1988 desired greater advising emphasis on the acquisition of study skills.

Follow-up Findings

Comparisons of means revealed only two statistically significant differences between the 1988 and 1991 groups. These findings suggest that generally the improvements in satisfaction with advising and overall gains in advising effectiveness have been maintained during the past four years of the program's implementation. The items that revealed a significant change indicated reduced student desire for greater emphasis on study skills and academic problems. Apparently as the program has preceeded, advisors are achieving greater success in appropriately apportioning time to study skills, academic, career, and personal advising activities.

DISCUSSION

The Freshman Advising Program has clearly succeeded in transforming freshman attitudes toward their advising experience. Students in the Class of 1988 reported greater contact with their advisors, and were more satisfied across the personal, career, academic, and study skills areas of advising. Of special interest is the finding that these gains were associated with increased overall happiness with Ursinus, suggesting both that the program is effective and that its impact may generalize somewhat beyond the delimited advising arena. Gains were maintained during the next four years of the program's implementation, as evidenced by the positive follow-up findings.

The extensive improvement in student satisfaction found on the varied AEQ measures is corroborated by improved retention figures. The percentage of the 1985 Freshman Class enrolled at the end of their first spring semester was lower than that of the 1988 Freshman Class (95.4 versus 96.4, respectively). Also, enrollment rates increased from 69.9% to 78.2% when assessed at the end of the Junior year, for the classes of 1985 and 1988, respectively. Obviously the Freshman Advising Program cannot claim credit for all the improvement in student satisfaction and retention rate. Rather, this new program is seen as one component of a commitment to improved service delivery which has prompted several beneficial, mutually reinforcing changes on the Ursinus campus.

Table 1

Comparison of means & standard deviations for the class of 1985 (old baseline group), the class of 1988 (new program group), & the class of 1991 (follow-up group) on individual AEQ items and summary scales

AEQ ITEM:	1985 MEAN (S.D.)	1988 MEAN (S.D.)	1991 MEAN (S.D.)
1. Frequency of contact (1=<2;2=3-5;3=6-10)	1.97 (0.52)	2.39 (0.75)	2.35 (0.67)
2. Advisor accessibility (5=Very;1=Not Very)	2.22 (0.87)	4.28 (0.75)	4.39 (0.79)
3. Ranked areas of adjustment difficulty (1=most difficult)			
study skills	3.15	1.85	2.09
career	1.66	3.02	2.82
academic	3.82	2.07	2.18
personal	2.40	3.04	2.89
4. Comfortable talking with advisor *	2.18 (0.84)	4.34 (0.79)	4.39 (0.84)
5. Satisfied with study skills advising	2.70 (0.89)	4.10 (0.63)	3.90 (0.86)
6. Not satisfied with career advising	3.46 (1.00)	2.08 (0.96)	1.98 (1.06)
7. Satisfied with academic advising	2.48 (1.17)	3.96 (0.91)	4.01 (1.07)
8. Satisfied with personal advising	2.87 (0.41)	3.87 (0.61)	3.66 (0.86)
9. Not satisfied with advising overall	3.30 (1.22)	1.94 (1.09)	1.96 (1.13)
10. Happy with Ursinus in general	2.05 (1.09)	4.22 (0.76)	4.16 (0.78)
11. Want more emphasis on study skills ***	2.06 (0.91)	3.73 (0.76)	3.45 (0.82)
12. Want less emphasis on career decisions	3.99 (0.85)	2.05 (0.78)	2.11 (0.89)
13. Want less emphasis on academic problems ***	4.32 (0.71)	1.53 (0.63)	1.80 (0.72)
14. Want more emphasis on personal problems**	3.18 (0.92)	3.26 (0.79)	3.20 (0.83)
15. Reluctant to discuss personal problems	3.77 (0.99)	2.91 (1.03)	2.99 (1.07)
16. Prefer other students for advice	3.87 (0.99)	3.53 (0.82)	3.65 (0.88)
Summary Scale: General advising effectiveness	15.07 (4.54)	29.71 (5.30)	29.81 (5.71)

* Note: for items 4-16, 5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree

** Note: this was the only AEQ item which did NOT show significance in the Class of 1985 versus 1988 comparison ($p<.01$).

*** Note: these were the only AEQ items that DID show significance in the Class of 1988 versus Class of 1991 comparison ($p<.01$).

Table 2

Comparison of means & standard deviations for the class of 1985 (old baseline group), the class of 1988 (new program group), & the class of 1991 (follow-up group) on individual AEQ items and summary scales

AEQ ITEM:	1985 MEAN (S.D.)	t	1988 MEAN (S.D.)	t	1991 MEAN (S.D.)
1. Contact	1.97 (0.52)	5.61	2.39 (0.75)	0.50	2.35 (0.67)
2. Access	2.22 (0.87)	22.09	4.28 (0.75)	1.27	4.39 (0.79)
3. Ranked areas					
study skills	3.15		1.85		2.09
career	1.66		3.02		2.82
academic	3.82		2.07		2.18
personal	2.40		3.04		2.89
4. Comfort *	2.18 (0.84)	22.75	4.34 (0.79)	0.55	4.39 (0.84)
5. Sat-study skills	2.70 (0.89)	14.45	4.10 (0.63)	2.36	3.90 (0.86)
6. Not sat-career	3.46 (1.00)	12.23	2.08 (0.96)	0.88	1.98 (1.06)
7. Sat-academic	2.48 (1.17)	12.32	3.96 (0.91)	0.45	4.01 (1.07)
8. Sat-personal	2.87 (0.41)	16.58	3.87 (0.61)	2.50	3.66 (0.86)
9. Not sat-overall	3.30 (1.22)	10.23	1.94 (1.09)	0.16	1.96 (1.13)
10. Ursinus-general	2.05 (1.09)	20.19	4.22 (0.76)	0.69	4.16 (0.78)
11. More study skills ***	2.06 (0.91)	17.36	3.73 (0.76)	3.15	3.45 (0.82)
12. Less career	3.99 (0.85)	20.69	2.05 (0.78)	0.64	2.11 (0.89)
13. Less academic ***	4.32 (0.71)	36.18	1.53 (0.63)	3.54	1.80 (0.72)
14. More personal **	3.18 (0.92)	0.81	3.26 (0.79)	0.66	3.20 (0.83)
15. Reluctance	3.77 (0.99)	7.56	2.91 (1.03)	0.68	2.99 (1.07)
16. Other students	3.87 (0.99)	3.26	3.53 (0.82)	1.25	3.65 (0.88)
Summary Scale:					
General	15.07 (4.54)	25.68	29.71 (5.30)	0.16	29.81 (5.71)

* Note: for items 4-16, 5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree

** Note: this was the only AEQ item which did NOT show significance in the Class of 1985 versus Class of 1988 comparison ($p<.01$).

*** Note: these were the only AEQ items that DID show significance in the Class of 1988 versus Class of 1991 comparison ($p<.01$).